The VALIANTS of VIRGINIA

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SYNOPSIS.

CHAPTER I—John Valiant, a rich society favorite, suddenly discovers that the Valiant corporation, which his father founded and which was the principal source of his wealth, has failed.

CHAPTER II—He voluntarily turns over his private fortune to the receiver for the corporation.

CHAPTER III—His entire remaining possessions consist of an old motor car, a white bull dog and Damory court, a neglected estate in Virginia.

CHAPTER IV—He learns that this estate came into the family by royal grant and has been in the possession of the Valiants ever since.

CHAPTER V—On the way to Damory court he meets Shirley Dandridge, an auburn-haired beauty, and decides that he is going to like Virginia immensely.

CHAPTER VI—An old negro tells Shirley's fortune and predicts great trouble for her on account of a man.

CHAPTER VII—Uncle Jefferson, an old negro, takes Valiant to Damory court.

CHAPTER VIII—Shirley's mother, Mrs. Dandridge, and Major Bristow exchange reminiscences during which it is revealed that the major, Valiant's father, and a man named Sassoon, were rivals for the hand of Mrs. Dandridge in her youth. Sassoon and Valiant fought a duel on her account in which the former was killed.

CHAPTER IX—Valiant finds Damory court overgrown with weeds and creepers and the buildings in a very much neglected condition. Uncle Jefferson and his wife, Aunt Daphne, are engaged as servants.

CHAPTER X—Valiant explores his ancestral home. He is surprised by a fox hunting party which invades his estate. He recognizes Shirley at the head of the party.

CHAPTER XI—He gives sanctuary to the cornered fox. Gossips discuss the advent of the new owner and recall the tragedy in which the elder Valiant took part.

CHAPTER XII—Valiant decides to rehabilitate Damory court and make the land produce a living for him.

CHAPTER XIII—He meets Shirley, who has been gathering flowers on the Valiant estate, and reveals his identity to her.

CHAPTER XIV—Valiant saves Shirley from the bite of a snake, which bites him. Knowing the deadliness of the bite, Shirley sucks the poison from the wound and saves his life.

CHAPTER XV.

The Anniversary.

The story was not a long one, though it omitted nothing: the morning fox-hunt and the identification of the new arrival at Damory Court as the owner of yesterday's stalled motor; the afternoon paid on the jessamine, the conversation with John Valiant in the woods.

Mrs. Dandridge, gazing into the fire, listened without comment, but more than once Shirley saw her hands clasp themselves together and thought, too, that she seemed strangely pale. The swift and tragic sequel to that meeting was the hardest to tell, and as she ended she put up her hand to her shoulder, holding it hard. "It was horrible!" she said. Yet now she did not shudder. Strangely enough, the sense of loathing which had been surging over her at recurrent intervals ever since that hour in the wood, had vanished utterly!

She read the newspaper article aloud and her mother listened with an expression that puzzled her. When she finished, both were silent for a moment, then she asked, "You must have known his father, dearest; didn't you?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Dandridge after a pause. "I—knew his father."

Shirley said no more, and facing each other in the candle-glow, across the spotless damask, they talked, as with common consent, of other things. She thought she had never seen her mother more brilliant. An odd excitement was flooding her cheek with red and she chatted and laughed as she had not done for years.

But after dinner the gaiety and effervescence faded quickly and Mrs. Dandridge went early to her room. She mounted the stair with her arm thrown about Shirley's pliant waist. At her door she kissed her, looking at her with a strange smile. "How curious," she said, as if to herself, "that it should have happened today!"

The reading-lamp had been lighted on her table. She drew a slim gold chain from the bosom of her dress and held to the light a little locket-brooch it carried. It was of black enamel, with a tiny laurel-wreath of pearls on one side encircling a single diamond. The other side was of crystal and covered a baby's russet-colored curl. In her fingers it opened and disclosed a miniature at which she looked closely for a moment.

Her eyes turned restlessly about the room. It had been hers as a girl, for Rosewood had been the old Garland homestead. It seemed now all at once to be full of calling memories of her youth.

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"How strange that it should have been today!" It had been on Shirley's lips to question, but the door had closed, and she went slowly downstairs. She sat a while thinking, but at length grew restless and began to walk to and fro across the floor, her hands clasped behind her head so that the cool air filled her flowing sleeves. In the hall she could hear the leisurely kon-kon—kon-kon of the tall clock. The evening outside was exquisitely still and the metallic monotone was threaded with the airy fiddle-fiddle of crickets in the grass and punctuated with the rain-glad cloap of a frog.

Shirley stepped lightly down to the wet grass. Looking back, she could see her mother's lighted blind. All around the ground was splotched with rose-petals, looking in the squares of light like bloody rain. She skimmed the lawn and ran a little way down the lane. A shuffling sound presently fell on her ear.

"Is that you, Unc' Jefferson?" she called softly.

"Yas'm!" The footsteps came nearer. "Et's me, Miss Shirley.' He tittered noiselessly, and she could see his bent form vibrating in the gloom. "Yo' reck'n Ah done forgit?"

"No, indeed. I knew you wouldn't do that. How is he?"

"He right much bettah," he replied in the same guarded tone. "Doctah he say he be all right in er few days, on'y he gotter lay up er while. Dat was er ugly nip he got f'om dat 'spisable reptyle."

"Do you think there can be any others about the grounds?"

"No'm. Dey mos'ly keeps ter de ma'sh-lan' en on'y runs whah de undah-bresh ez thick. I gwineter fix dat ter-morrow. Mars' Valiant he tell me ter grub et all out en make er bonfiah ob it."

"That's right, Unc' Jefferson. Good night, and thank you for coming."

She started back to the house, when his voice stopped her.

"Mis' Shirley, yo' don' keer ef de ole man geddahs two er three ob dem roses? Seems lak young mars' moughty fon' ob dem. He got one in er glass but et's mos' daid now."

"Wait a minute," she said, and disappeared in the darkness, returning

"I'm Tempted to Stay Sick and Do Nothing but Eat."

quickly with a handful which she put in his grasp.

"There!" she whispered, and slipped back through the perfumed dark.

An hour later she stood in the cozy stillness of her bedroom. She threw off her gown, slipped into a soft loose robe of maize-colored silk and stood before the small glass. She pulled out the amber pins and drew her wonderful hair on either side of her face, looking out at her reflection like a mermaid from between the rippling waves of a moon-golden sea.

At last she turned, and seating herself at the desk, took from it a diary. She scanned the pages at random, her eyes catching lines here and there. "A good run today. Betty and Judge Chalmers and the Pendleton boys. My fourth brush this season." A frown drew itself across her brows, and she turned the page. "One of the hounds broke his leg, and I gave him to Rickey." * * * "Chilly Lusk to dinner today, after swimming the Loring Rapid."

She bit her lip, turned abruptly to the new page and took up her pen. "This morning a twelve-mile run to Damory Court," she wrote. "This afternoon went for cape jessamines." There she paused. The happenings and sensations of that day would not be recorded. They were unwritable.

She laid down her pen and put her forehead on her clasped hands. How empty and inane these entries seemed beside this rich and eventful twenty-four hours just passed! What had she been doing a year ago today? she wondered. The lower drawer of the desk held a number of slim diaries like the one before her. She pulled it out, took up the last-year's volume and opened it.

"Why," she said in surprise, "I got jessamine for mother this very same day last year!" she pondered frowning, then reached for a third and a fourth. From these she looked up, startled. That date in her mother's calendar called for cape jessamines. What was the fourteenth of May to her?

She bent a slow troubled gaze about her. The room had been hers as a child. She seemed suddenly back in that childhood, with her mother bending over her pillow and fondling her rebellious hair. When the wind cried for loneliness out in the dark she had sung old songs to her. Sad songs! Even in those pinafore years Shirley had vaguely realized that pain lay behind the brave gay mask. Was there something — some event — that had caused that dull-colored life and unfulfilment? And was today, perhaps, its anniversary?

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John Valiant sat propped up on the library couch, an open magazine unheeded on his knee. The reading-stand beside him was a litter of letters and papers. The bow-window was open and the honeysuckle breeze blew about him, lifting his hair and ruffling the leaves of the papers. In the garden three darkies were laboring, under the supervision of Uncle Jefferson. The unsightly weeds and lichen were gone from the graveled paths, and from the fountain pool, whose shaft now spouted a slender spray shivered by the breeze into a million diamonds, which fell back into the pool with a tintinabulant trickle and drip.

The master of Damory Court closed the magazine with a sigh. "If I could only do it all at once!" he muttered. "It takes such a confounded time. Four days they've been working now, and they haven't done much more than clean up." He laughed, and threw the magazine at the dog who [illegible] with dignified alacrity. "After [illegible] it's been thirty years getting in this condition. I guess we're doing pretty well."

He stretched luxuriously. "I'll take a hand at it myself tomorrow. I'm as right as rain again now, thanks to Aunt Daph and the doctor. Something of a crusty citizen, the doctor, but he's all to the good."

A heavy step came along the porch and Uncle Jefferson appeared with a tray holding a covered dish with a plate of biscuit and a round jam-pot. "Look here," said John Valiant, "I had my luncheon three hours ago, I'm being stuffed like a milk-fed turkey."

The old man smiled widely. "Et's jes' er li'l snack er broth," he said. "Reck'n et'll kinder float eroun' de yuddah things. Dis' yeah pot's dat apple-buttah whut Miss Mattie Sue sen' yo' by Rickey Snyder."

Valiant sniffed with satisfaction. "I'm getting so confoundedly spoiled," he said, "that I'm tempted to stay sick and do nothing but eat. By the way, Uncle Jefferson, where did Rickey come from? Does she belong here?"

"No, suh. She come f'om Hell's-Half-Acre."

"What's that?"

"Dat's dat ornery passle o' folks yondah on de Dome," explained Uncle Jefferson. "Dey's been dah long's Ah kin recommembah—jes' er ramshackle lot o' shif'less po'-white trash whut git erlong anyways 't all."

"That's interesting," said Valiant. "So Rickey belonged there?"

"Yas, suh; nebbah 'd a-come down heah 'cep'in' fo' Mis' Shirley. She de one whut fotch de li'l gal outen dat place, en put huh wid Mis' Mattie Sue, three yeah ergo."

A sudden color came into John Valiant's cheeks. "Tell me about it." His voice vibrated eagerly.

"Well, suh," continued Uncle Jefferson, "dey was one o' dem low-down Hell's-Half-Acrers, name' Greef King, whut call hese'f de mayah ob de Dome, en he went on de rampage one day, en took ahtah his wife. She was er po' sickly 'ooman, wid er li'l gal five yeah ol' by er fust husban'. He done beat huh heap o' times befo', but dis time he boun' ter finish huh. Ah reck'n he was too drunk fo' dat, en she got erway en run down heah. Et was wintah time en dah's snow on de groun'. Dah's er road f'om de Dome dat hits de Red Road clost' ter Rosewood—dat ar's de Dandridge place—en she come dah. Reck'n she wuz er pitiful-lookin' obstacle. 'Peahs lak she done put de li'l gal up in de cabin lof' en hid de laddah, en she mos' crazy fo' feah Greef git huh. She lef' he huntin' fo' de young 'un when she run erway. Dey was on'y Mis' Judith en Mis' Shirley en de gal Em'line at Rosewood. Well, suh, dey wa'nt no time ter sen' fo' men. Whut yo' reck'n Mis' Shirley do? She ain' afeahd o' nuffin on dis yerf, en she on'y sebenteen yeah ol' den, too. She don' tell Mis' Judith—no, suh! She run out ter de stable en saddle huh hoss, en she gallop up dat road ter Hell's-Half-Acre lak er shot outen er shovel."

Valiant brought his hands together sharply. "Yes, yes," he said. "And then?"

"When she come ter Greef King's cabin, he done foun' de laddah, en one er he foots was on de rung. He had er ax in he han'. De po' li'l gal was peepin' down thoo' de cracks o' de flo', en prayin' de bestes' she know how. She say arterwuhds dat she reck'n de Good Lawd sen' er angel, fo' Mis' Shirley were all in white—she didn' stop ter change huh close. She didn' say nuffin, Mis' Shirley didn'. She on'y lay huh han' on Greef King's ahm, en he look at huh face, en he drop he ax en go. Den she clumb de laddah en fotch de chile down in huh ahms en take huh on de hoss en come back. Dat de way et happen, suh."

"And Rickey was that little child!"

"Yas, suh, she sho' was. In de mawnin' er posse done ride up ter Hell's-Half-Acre en take Greef King in. De majah he argyfy de case fo' de State, en when he done git thoo', dey mos' put de tow eroun' King's nek in de co'ot room. He done got six yeah, en et mos' broke de majah's ha'at dat dey couldn' give him no mo'. He wuz cert'n'y er bad aig, dat Greef wuz. Dey say he done sw'ah he gwineter do up de majah when he git out."

Such was the story which Uncle Jefferson told, standing in the doorway. When his shuffling step had retreated, Valiant went to the table and picked up a slim tooled volume that lay there. It was "Lucile," which he had found in the hall the night of his arrival. He opened it to a page where, pressed and wrinkled but still retaining its bright red pigment, lay what had been a rose.

He stood looking at it abstractedly, his nostrils widening to its crushed spicy scent, then closed it and slipped it into his pocket.

CHAPTER XVI.

In Devil-John's Day.

He was still sitting motionless when there came a knock at the door and it opened to admit the gruff voice of Doctor Southall. A big form was close behind him.

"Hell. Up, I see. I took the liberty of bringing Major Bristow."

The master of Damory Court came forward—limping the least trifle—and shook hands.

"Glad to know you, sah," said the major. "Allow me to congratulate you; it's not every one who gets bitten by one of those infernal moccasins that lives to talk about it. You must be a pet of Providence, or else you have a cast-iron constitution, sah."

Valiant waved his hand toward the man of medicine, who said, "I reckon Miss Shirley was the Providence in the case. She had sense enough to send for me quick and speed did it."

"Well, sah," the major said, "I reckon under the circumstances, your first impressions of the section aren't anything for us to brag about."

"I'm delighted; it's hard for me to tell how much."

"Wait till you know the fool place," growled the doctor testily. "You'll change your tune."

The major smiled genially. "Don't be taken in by the doctor's pessimism. You'd have to get a yoke of three-year oxen to drag him out of this state."

"It would take as many for me." Valiant laughed a little. "You who have always lived here, can scarcely understand what I am feeling, I imagine. You see, I never knew till quite recently—my childhood was largely spent abroad, and I have no near relatives—that my father was a Virginian and that my ancestors always lived here. Why, there's a room upstairs with the very toys they played with when they were children! To learn that I belong to it all; that I myself am the last link in such a chain!"

"The ancestral instinct," said the doctor. "I'm glad to see that it means something still, in these rotten days."

"Of course," John Valiant continued, "every one knows that he has ancestors. But I'm beginning to see that what you call the ancestral instinct needs a locality and a place. In a way it seems to me that an old estate like this has a soul too—a sort of clan or family soul that reacts on the descendant."

"Rather a Japanesy idea, isn't it?" observed the major. "But I know what you mean. Maybe that's why old Virginian families hang on to their land in spite of hell and high-water. They count their forebears real live people, quite capable of turning over in their graves."

"Mine are beginning to seem very real to me. Though I don't even know their Christian names yet, I can judge them by their handiwork. The men who built Damory Court had a sense of beauty and of art."

"And their share of deviltry, too," put in the doctor.

"I suppose so," admitted his host. "At this distance I can bear even that. But good or bad, I'm deeply thankful that they chose Virginia. Since I've been laid up, I've been browsing in the library here—"

"A bit out of date now, I reckon," said the major, "but it used to pass muster. Your grandfather was something of a book-worm. He wrote a history of the family, didn't he?"

"Yes. I've found it. 'The Valiants of Virginia.' I'm reading the Revolutionary chapters now. It never seemed real before—it's been only a slice of impersonal and rather dull history. But the book has made it come alive. I'm having the thrill of the globe-trotter the first time he sees the Tower of London or the field of Waterloo. I see more than that stubble-field out yonder; I see a big wooden stockade with soldiers in ragged buff and blue guarding it."

The major nodded, "Ah, yes," he said. "The Continental prison-camp."

"And just over this rise there I can see an old court-house, and the Virginia Assembly boiling under the golden tongue-lashing of lean raw-boned Patrick Henry. I see a messenger gallop up and see the members scramble to their saddles—and then, Tarleton and his red-coats streaming up, too late."

"Well," commented the doctor deliberately, "all I have to say is, don't materialize too much to Mrs. Poly Gifford when you meet her. She'll have you lecturing to the Ladies' Church Guild before you know it."

"I hope you ride, Mr. Valiant?" the latter asked genially.

"I'm fond of it," said Valiant, "but I have no horse as yet."

"I was thinking," pursued the major, "of the coming tournament."

"Tournament?"

The doctor cut in. "A ridiculous cock-a-doodle-do which gives the young bucks a chance to rig out in silly toggery and prance their colts before a lot of petticoats!"

"It's an annual affair," explained the major; "a kind of spectacle. For many years, by the way, it has been held on a part of this estate—perhaps you will have no objection to its use this season?—and at night there is a dance at the Country Club. By the way, you must let me introduce you there—tomorrow. I've taken the liberty already of putting your name up."

"Good lord!" growled the doctor, aside. "He counts himself young! If I'd reached your age, Bristow—"

"You have," said the major, nettled. "Four years ago!—As I was saying, Mr. Valiant, they ride for a prize. It's a very ancient thing—I've seen references to it in a colonial manuscript in the Byrd Library at Westover. No doubt it's come down directly from the old jousts."

(Continued Next Week.)